Philosophers in Japan in the Period of World War II
Reflecting the Philosophy of Nishida against the Background of Social Phenomena

Hisaki HASHI (University of Vienna)

Introduction

The problems under discussion are seen as a complex interrelationship of several factors in Japan during the years 1937–1945:

(1) The phenomena of militarism and totalitarianism pervading state politics.
(2) The suppression of freedom in teaching in all areas of education and culture.
(3) Philosophers, scientists and artists who, expressing themselves in various media, took part in this totalitarian suppression.

These phenomena were criticized in Japan immediately after World War II, the critics opposing the Kyoto School and broaching cultural and sociological aspects as well as politological, socialist and Marxist topics. The same issues have been discussed by Anglo-American authors in various media from the 1990s onwards, 50 years after the end of the war. In these discussions the complexity of the problem has become obvious, showing that the wide dimensions of language, culture, history, philosophy, religion and society in Japan had usually been approached from only one socio-phenomenological aspect. The reality has a complex structure that can be broken down into three main strands:

(a) special phenomena of Japanese society, history and civilization in the war period;
(b) extraordinary aspects of religion and philosophy in Japan in this period of totalitarianism;
(c) general characteristics in the Japanese tradition of religion, philosophy and literature.

Topics discussed in political papers in the West from the 1990s onwards have been ‘Zen, War and Nationalism’, ‘The Philosophy of the Kyoto-School and Nationalism’ and the ‘Special Phenomena of Japanese Society’ among others. The result of these discussions has shown the individual issues that should be differentiated. Various themes, viewed in political, socio-cultural, philosophical and human science aspects, were collectively treated overall, neglecting to find answers to several important questions. I shall try to give an explanation for each of the individual points in order to avoid misunderstandings and erroneous premature interpretations.

1. The Relationship between Zen Buddhism and the Philosophy of the Kyoto School

An article which appeared in Neue Zürcher Zeitung on 1 June 1999 under the title, ‘Zen-Buddhismus als nationalistische Ideologie’ (‘Zen Buddhism as Nationalist Ideology’), is a good example of how these issues were treated in the 1990s. A common model of misinterpretation emerges, which mixes together the following factors: (α) A misunderstanding of Zen Buddhism as a kind of esoteric mysticism, serving as a mass-psychological control instrument. (β) A misconception of trying to trace influences of both Zen Buddhism and the philosophy of the Kyoto School in Japanese state policy during the years 1937–1945. (γ) The development of militarism and totalitarianism at the same time in Japan.

Reports from East Asia do not occupy extensive space in European political journals, and sometimes they tend to interpret the phenomenon under discussion, which comprises centuries of historical, cultural and social development, from a one-sided angle, drawing a simplified conclusion based on a purely individual view. Three aspects are noteworthy:

(1) A special historical phenomenon in which the science and culture of the society in question were suppressed by the totalitarian regime.
(2) A critical evaluation of this special phenomenon, viewed from the perspective of peacetime.
(3) An evaluation of a foreign civilization from one’s own point of view – different structures and systems of foreign culture are not considered. A neglected aspect is a comparison between one’s own way of thinking (intra-system) and the reflections of a foreign culture and mentality (extra-system).
2. Political and Historical Aspects

Viewed in terms of historical events, there was a conflict of opinion in the government of Japan during the period 1937–1945. The Ministry of the Army, in a struggle for power against the Naval Ministry, obtained the leading position, forming the Cabinet under Prime Minister Tōjō Hideki (Prime Minister, Army Minister and Minister of the Interior between 1941 and 1944), which decided upon an expansion of the war in South East Asia. The leaders in the Naval Ministry were in contact with several middle-aged philosophers and scientists who had been teachers at the Kyoto University. Upon an unofficial request made by the Naval Ministry they held a series of exclusive tutorials during the years 1942 and 1943. It should be noted that the protocols of these tutorials were kept secret and they had no noticeable influence on the policy pursued by the government.

3. Philosophers as ‘Supporters of the Ideology of the Regime’ – A Controversial Subject since 1946

The question of whether philosophers of the Kyoto School were ideological supporters of World War II has been repeatedly discussed from various angles throughout the post-War period. There are two principal historical documents, both records of round-table discussions/symposia of the mid-generation philosophers of the Kyoto School; ‘The Position of World History and Japan’ (1941, published in chūō kōron in 1942–3) and ‘Overcoming Modernism’ (1942, published in bungakukai in 1942). The main academic participants were scholars and teachers of the mid-generation at the University of Kyoto; Kousaka Masaaki, Kouyama Iwao, Nishitani Keiji and Suzuki Shigetaka. It should be noted that the aged Nishida Kitarō was professor emeritus at this time and had no personal connection with the symposia. The contents of these symposia, from the point of view of fanatical nationalists and militarists, was ‘highly adverse to this holy war’. The participants were criticized as ‘absolutely indecent citizens of this unique state and imperium’. At the same time, some university teachers of the University of Tokyo, the University of Kyushū and others opposed the Kyoto School. The abovementioned symposia were criticized after the end of the war from other viewpoints by sociologists, political scientists with a marxist orientation, anthropologists and philosophers of the university departments, coining the epithet of the Kyoto School as ‘supporters of the war ideology’.

3.1. An Idealistic Concept of Intellectuals

The symposium ‘Overcoming Modernism’ can be described as a round table of middle-aged writers (Kobayashi Hideo, Kamei Katsuichirō, Miyoshi Tatsuji and others) and philosophers (Nishitani Keiji, Suzuki Shigetaka, Shimomura Toratarō) who were aware of the position of Japan’s civilization, science and literature vis-à-vis global history. Reflecting on this they tried to blaze a trail for further development in connection with the histories and civilizations of other countries. Their horizon of thought was purely philosophical and literary. However, each statement of the participants in the discussion was weighted by the historical fact that all those present were citizens subjected to a totalitarian regime in a period of war (1937–1945). Critical reflections and interpretations of the participants centred around the question of if and how the civilizations of Japan, East Asia and South East Asia could be capable of a joint political, economic and perhaps cultural development as a ‘Union of Great East Asia’. All their visions and any criticism moved within this horizon of ideas. Some of the terms, such as ‘the universal political unity of the eight continents’ (hakkō ichiu 八纮一宇), ‘the political system of Japan’ (kokutai 国体), ‘the way of the Japanese empire’ (kōdō 皇道) and others, reflect the way of thinking typical of nationalism and militarism during the war. In other words, the political jargon of this period required terminology of this type. If you refrained from using it you were liable to be stigmatized as an ‘indecent citizen’ (hi-kokumin 非国民).

Criticism in the post-war period has been based on the argument that the symposia, by way of their nationalist character, furthered a political and ideological ‘Japanism’ by neglecting to criticize...
state policies concerning the war. In literature concerned with social phenomena, this aspect is often voiced, mixing together two different perspectives. The critic reviews a particular historical phenomenon, while his point of view remains rooted in a liberal present where peace and freedom of opinion are taken for granted. The phenomenon of a time of totalitarianism and war is seen as a special extra-system phenomenon. What is criticized is extra-system, evaluated from the critic’s own intra-system viewpoint only. What is lacking is a comparative aspect between the intra-system and the extra-system phenomena.

With regard to the topic of the symposium ‘Overcoming Modernism’, there were several differences of opinion between the writers and philosophers.\(^6\) Shared by all, however, was one civilization-critical aspect focusing on the issue ‘What is Modernism?’ Arising in western and central Europe in the nineteenth century, the modernism spread throughout the world has left a typological imprint on non-European regions – the reproduction of a model born in a region of Europe. From the Meiji era (since 1868) onwards, ‘Modernism’, spreading from North America and Europe to the East, gained ground in Japan, too. The terms ‘West and East’, ‘Occident and Orient’ are not clear-cut geographical regions, however. Is the Near East included in the Orient? Does the West comprise Latin America? How can the categories of West and East be defined? Intellectuals in Japan, at the time when these symposia were held, knew that Japanese society, from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, had undertaken a modernization on the basis of its own traditions, absorbing cultural influences from Europe and Northern America rather than following the traditional method of learning propagated on the Chinese mainland. Some intellectuals, however, realized that underneath the formal outer layer of modernization, the civilizations of East and West, developed over centuries, remained present. They argued that the development of their society and civilization is not a reproduction of the Western model at all and the cultural development in their society must continue to follow its own course, notwithstanding the influence of foreign cultures. For this background it is necessary to resort to one’s own literary, religious and philosophical traditions. Writers such as Kobayashi Hideo had gone in this direction. Philosophers such as Nishitani had emphasized another focal point: ‘Europe’s philosophy from the beginning of modern times has made a valuable contribution worldwide to the history of human thought. In the twentieth century a new philosophy was called for, initiated by philosophers from non-European regions who approached issues so far without any dependence upon the occidental history of philosophy. The renovation of world philosophical history is expected now.’ In short, these philosophers followed a new philosophy of ‘Post-Modernism’ in their intellectual and inter-cultural level of thought.

3.2. Idealistic Thought under the Militaristic Regime
At the same time, however, their ideas were revealing the limited horizon of citizens under a totalitarian regime. Even though they did indirectly criticize the colonial and imperial policies of several countries, including Japan, their statements remained within the limits of ‘decent citizens of the leading state of the Union of Great East Asia’. If any had stepped outside these norms, he would have risked his life, and could be arrested by special police agents enforcing the law of ‘Public Cooperation for State-Political Order’ (kokka sódōin-hó 国家総動員法).\(^7\) This procedure controlled the organizers of the symposia, and even the publisher of ‘indecent’ proceedings could be questioned by the state police.

4. The Phenomena of Militarism and Totalitarianism in Japan’s State Policy 1937–1945
Since the political reformation in 1868 (the Meiji Restoration), Japan’s form of government has been a monarchic one. The Shōgunat, reigning from the twelfth to the nineteenth century, was replaced by the imperial family, with a dual structure of power; the formal reign of the emperor and the actual power resting with ministries and senates. After the campaign in Manchuria in 1937, the Japanese state uniformly took up the line of militarism. The Ministry for Science and Culture issued a special textbook, ‘About the Essence of the State’ (kokutai no hongi 国体の本義),
destined for teachers in general education schools, and another book in 1941, ‘The Way of the People under the Imperial Reign’ (shinmin no michi 臣民の道). Their contents were political and ideological propaganda in favour of militarism, underlining the ‘unique history of the Japanese state and its historical development’, with misleading associations and misquotations of classical literary works (kojiki 古事記, nihon shoki 日本書紀), which were scientifically untenable.

One has to note that parliamentary democracy in Japan was eliminated in 1940, when the different political parties were replaced by one uniform party (assisted by taisei yokusankai 大政翼賛会, led by Konoe Fumimaro) which became subservient to ministries and government organs of the leading power. The religious community as a legal entity was integrated into the uniform party by suppressing its freedom of teaching and opinion through constant control exerted by the superior special police organ (abbreviation: tokkō keisatsu 特高警察). Zen Buddhists, as members of one of the many religious communities, had no opportunity to preserve the legal status of their community as an independent entity. Zen Buddhism thus became another victim of state power, which served the ‘well-being of decent citizens’.

5. Phenomena of Religion and Culture 1937–1945

5.1. Neo-Shintoism and State Policy

Contrary to several misleading definitions, Zen Buddhism was not a state religion in Japan in the period of World War II. The religion unified and propagated by the state during the war was kokka shintō, a Neo-Shintoism with a political and ideological tenor, the origin of which can be traced back to the beginning of the nineteenth century. One of its important representatives was Hirata Atsutane (1776–1843). The teachings of Neo-Shintoism can be clearly differentiated from Shintō, which had been practised from ancient times. It was a political ideology christened ‘Shintō’, established in opposition to the expanding global colonialism of that period. (‘Shintō’ means literally ‘the way of the gods’; an animist, polytheistic, ancestor worship practised since antiquity.)

The eighteenth century, on the other hand, had seen the birth of a humanistic movement running counter to the rigid formality of the nationalized Neo-Confucianism (furthered by the Tokugawa-Shōgunat government). This was eagerly embraced by writers and historians on the basis of the country’s own literary and artistic achievements, under the name of kokugaku (国学 ‘teaching of native literature’). Representatives of this movement included Kamo no Mabuchi (1697–1769) and Motoori Norinaga (1730–1801). Their main goal was to go back to the roots of humanity, to that which is natural to man, while at the same time they criticized the formalistic rigidity of Neo-Confucianism which was foreign to the Japanese indigenous tradition. The sources of their teachings were the truly Japanese works of literature, which were free from influences from the Chinese mainland. The tenets of kokugaku originally did not contain any political ideology, but, from the nineteenth century onwards, they were often cited by the representatives of the Neo-Shinto kokka shintō in order to bolster their ideology.

5.2. Misleading Quotations of the Classics in Political Propaganda

The totalitarian propaganda machinery has often misquoted indigenous classical authors. ‘Death of the Ego, resurrection of the true Self’, this Kōan quotation of classical Zen was a useful basis for the psychological control of the masses, the true meaning of this postulate becoming widely distorted. The original Zen concept is one of a metaphysical and philosophical nature. Based on the Zen 禪 (or 禪) as ‘showing an indivisible truth of particular being’ in the existential reality of everyday life, this Kōan presents the idea of the negation of the negation of the subjective, one-sided viewpoint of a self-centralized ego-subject and the humane basis of an ego-less self resulting therefrom. The resulting viewpoint of this ego-less self is open to recognize and further develop what is good and what is true in everyday life.

This – according to the European and North American native and intra-system way of thinking – seems to be an infringement of the sovereignty of the individual ego which is seen in ethics as the
basic substratum of being. With the advent of ‘intercultural philosophy’ in Europe in the second half of the twentieth century, a misunderstanding developed in that this absolute ‘selflessness’ was taken for the destruction of the freedom of an individual\(^7\) or for a schizophrenic disturbance. This is a misunderstanding much to be regretted, caused by a lack of information within the scope of the basic knowledge of the philosophers. A section of the dharma monastery lecture of Harada Sogaku (a renowned Zen Buddhist and teacher of the twentieth century), held in the course of his Zen instruction, was quoted in Brian Victoria’s book as parallel to the mass propaganda of Hitler and Goebbels.\(^8\) Furthermore, one should always take into account all the details of what kind of uniform regime governed the society. One should also consider carefully who was being addressed at that lecture and what political aim was connected to the statement.


6.1. The Beginnings of the State Policy of Censorship

Tanabe Hajime (1885–1962) and Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), both important philosophers of the Kyoto School, were invited to join the Committee of the Science Ministry in 1935–1936 as advisory council members to ‘clarify the definition of the political system’ (kokutai meicho 国体明徴).\(^9\) Nishida voiced his indirect criticism of the nationalist tendencies of the political system. Tanabe proposed to introduce actively the systematic and scientific approach practised in Europe and North America into the current education system, instead of exalting nationalism. The recently published protocols of Nishida and Tanabe’s statements reflect the strained atmosphere pervading the Committee, which represented the power of government. Both philosophers had – indirectly and within certain limits – vended their criticism despite the constraints of this environment.\(^10\)

6.2. The Tutorials of Philosophers of the Kyoto School

A number of historical facts previously unknown have recently come to light. For instance, as mentioned above, mid-generation philosophers (disciples of Nishida) and other teachers of the Kyoto University were unofficially requested by the Naval Ministry to hold regular tutorials discussing the political vision of a ‘Union of Great East Asia’. The discussions also highlighted the conflict between army militarists who stood for an extension of the war and navy militarists who wanted an early end to the war by reconciliation. Recently, the protocols of these unofficial tutorials were discovered and edited by Ōhashi Ryōsuke.\(^11\) The philosopher who received the request from the Naval Ministry was Kouyama Iwao, a senior lecturer at the Kyoto University. Regular participants were Nishitani Keiji and Suzuki Shigetaka, both mid-generation philosophers at that time. In September 1942 Tanabe Hajime (1885–1962) addressed this circle with his lecture on ‘The Logic of the East Asia Union’.\(^12\) The attentive reader of this lecture will find in it one basic aspect of Tanabe’s theory of cognition before the war, that of ‘species’.

6.3. Tanabe’s ‘Logic of the Species’

According to ‘Logic of the Species’ (1935, 1936, 1937), one of the important subjects by Tanabe\(^13\), the essence of his terminology can be explained as follows. The basic meaning of the character for ‘species’ (shu, 種) is ‘seed’, it stands for the verbs and concepts ‘to split up’ and ‘to develop into a new kind of species’. In this process the form and unit of the original species is dissolved (becomes zero) and is transformed into a new unit. Tanabe understood his concept of species not just as the Aristotelian ousia (essentia, substantia) but as a substance-free, flexibly changing being (under the term of mu as unlimited potentiality of transmission), which he saw as the basis of a dialectically developing society. According to Tanabe’s ‘Logic of the Species’, the term ‘species’ implies a dialectic possibility of splitting up and developing into a further stage of life. At the same time, the species is characterized by the dynamics of self-preservation. If two opposing species meet, this meeting results in conflict, which is followed by (synergistic) confluence. Such a species, in the
6.4. Various Critics of Tanabe’s ‘Logic of Species’

In the post-war period, Tanabe’s theory had a problematic consequence. Some commentators, drawing on the parallelism between the state politics of the ‘Union of Great East Asia’ and Tanabe’s partial agreement to the wartime regime, thought that Tanabe’s concept of the species had furthered the glorification of Japanese philosophy hand in hand with the controversial issue of nationalism, as well as the nationalist attitude of the philosophers of the Kyoto School. Such an interpretation is found — in spite of his careful research — in Heisig’s paper, ‘Tanabe’s Logic of the Specific and the Spirit of Nationalism’. 24

The twofold issue has to be treated carefully; ‘species’ as the overall philosophical basic concept evolved by Tanabe, and his behaviour as a ‘decent citizen’ during the war, without essaying any ideological protest. If these two basic facts are seen from the liberal angle of the present only and are not treated separately, there is the danger of misunderstanding. The concept of ‘species’ — the natural splitting-up and the dialectical development towards a newly formed unit — had been elaborated 1935-1937, independently of the direct political regime and the subsequent totalitarian system (1937–1945).

In his lecture in the tutorial in 1943, Tanabe criticized the tendency of government officials, and scientists working hand in hand with them, to rig up a primitive, basic scheme in which the political ideal of a ‘Union of Great East Asia’ could be complemented by an analogous pattern of ‘harmony in the family’: ‘The family as the stable core of human society, community as a harmonious unity comprising the multiplicity of families, society as a unity of the multiplicity of communities, the state as harmonious multiplicity of societies, multiplicity of states in a harmonious communal union based on the family’. Tanabe regretted the lack of intellectual rigour of the propagators of these slogans and explained that not even the family can be such a simple harmonious community, since the species within the family, through the opposing units of the spouses and their parents, implies the constant possibility of splitting up. The foundation of a family and its development are possible only by the split and fusion of different species; as soon as the family has established its autonomy it becomes a species of its own, which — via further conflicts and reconciliations — is capable of further development towards a further species of the community. This dialectic development, according to Tanabe, is not specifically linked to a certain nation, political system, people or race. Tanabe emphasized that a species contains a self-perpetuating dynamism by constantly implying a possibility for splitting and creating new conflicts. He represented a prototypical idea of ‘spirit’ in the meaning of Hegel’s ‘Geist’ which can be realized in concrete phenomena of real lives. According to Tanabe: ‘Species have the characteristic that they will never be finite. The internal fission of the species and their projection towards external species, their friction and unification are in a constant process, and this process of development is infinite.’ 25

Unfortunately Heisig’s interpretation of Tanabe’s ‘Logic of the Species’ is misleading including the incorrect translation and interpretation of the quoted works of Nishida. 26 From the angle of hermeneutics, the basic concept of species, as seen by Tanabe, had nothing to do with the definition of some of the civilizations in Asia regarding their ‘closedness’ and ‘purity of race’. A kind of self-perpetuation closed off against outward influences is only one side of the species, which must be dialectically negated according to Tanabe’s logic.

With Tanabe the following factor of dialectic thinking is intra-system, whereas according to Hegel’s Dialektik it would be extra-system. A species, seen as a unit capable of dynamic change, is free from fixation to any stratum of being. Its dynamic change is effected by μυ (無). Μυ is literally ‘nothing’, its terminological meaning is an unlimited potentiality for development of good and its possibility of change which exists in human life. Heisig’s explanation of this issue, in my opinion, is one-sided and partly misleading, in that he defines μυ as ‘absolute nothingness’, which
is able to imply good and bad, approval of war and resignation during the post-war period (with reference to Tanabe’s personal behaviour before and after the war). Heisig blends together these elements, justifying this varied socio-phenomenological mixture, by which Tanabe’s dialectical concept of sō-soku (相即) is included in the meaning of the relationship of negation, affirmation and their synergetic unity. It should be noted that these dialectic conflicts in an implicit way, their dissolution and further development in open harmony, were not specific to Tanabe in connection with the phenomenon of World War II. A prototype of such a logic can already be found in the ancient Chinese philosophy of nature (the theory of the five activities, the tension between yīn and yáng and their further development). Sueki Takehiro presents this position in his book, *Rationalistic Philosophy in the Civilizations of East Asia*, in his view of analytical philosophy, calling its essence ‘Dialectics of Harmony’.  

6.5. Pure Philosophical Ideas against the real existence of the Philosopher as a Person under the Regime

The following duality in Tanabe’s theory of cognition should be carefully considered. On the one hand is the level of his cultural social philosophy, defined in his terminology as ‘the Logic of Species’, the socio-phenomenological level that comprises all citizens, and on the other is the political vision of the ‘Union of Great East Asia’ which appeared at the same time.

Some commentators combine each socio-philosophical statement of Tanabe with a single phenomenon, without considering the complex background. In this way the philosophers of the Kyoto School are interpreted as supporters of the nationalist system. The critical reader of texts could be aware of these simplifications. The problem is that a comparative and reflective view of philosophy is interrupted because the writer is bound to his own intra-system viewpoint, he is incapable of surpassing this limited horizon and applying an extra-system angle of vision. This limited vision intensifies his criticism against the selected, partial extra-system phenomena, because he fails to grasp the original meaning of the concepts which are criticized only by his intra-system viewpoint. It is regrettable that an unreflective criticism becomes the basis of misinterpretation of globalized phenomena worldwide. In my opinion, modern philosophy should resort to constant and careful reflection which is free from prejudice and transcends the borders of different disciplines.

7. Nishida and his Philosophy in the World War II Period

7.1. Nishida as a person against the background of this socio-historic phenomenon

Unlike some philosophers of the younger and middle generation (Nishitani, Kouyama, Suzuki and Tanabe), Nishida refrained from publicly voicing political statements and from participating in political symposia. His letters of the year 1935 show that he was concerned about the growth of fascism and militarism. In November 1935, Nishida, upon repeated requests from the Ministry of Science and Culture, finally agreed to take part in the Committee for the Renewal of Education, albeit on a limited scale. However, he stayed away due to the unsatisfactory scientific qualifications of most the members and because of their political orientation. Letter no. 963 shows Nishida’s attitude vis-à-vis the expanding militarism of the regime: ‘You know, our time is governed by fascism. However, if we earnestly consider the future of our country, uninfluenced by our ego, we must not prematurely fight against fascists, but we must in all cases patiently and continuously (by word and by teaching) try to lead these people in the right way.’ Several of Nishida’s letters bear proof of the changing situation caused by the expanding war. They show that the aged philosopher was deeply concerned about the escalation of the conflict, including the censorship. There was constant supervision by political organs (genron hōkokukai 言論報国会, State Committee for Public Opinion, cf. letter no. 2057), which resulted in an attack upon Nishida’s articles ‘The Principle of the New World Order’ (1943), ‘The Problem of State Reason’ (1941) and ‘The Essence of the State’ (1944).
In his letters addressed to politicians and government officials, Nishida explained his idea that a state must never succumb to national centralism. The true aim of state policy must be to correctly position the state within the global community:
The world must not be judged from the viewpoint of national interest. On the other hand, the individual state is to be considered and critically evaluated by the global community. In this way, the state is seen from a global position as a partial phenomenon in the history of man. Among the state ideologies of the present (1937–1945) there are conservatism, mistaken nationalism and state centralism. Japanese state policy should in no way lead to a fanatical centralism of an unscientific nature.\(^{34}\)

7.2. The attempt by the militarists to make use of Nishida’s name

‘The Principle of the New World Order’ (1943) was the title of an essay published under Nishida’s name. The Seminar for State Policy Orientation (kokusaku kenkyūkai 国策研究会), an accessory organ of the Naval Ministry, had requested Nishida to write a short article.\(^{35}\) The idea behind the activity of this seminar was the intention of the government to organize an international conference for politicians and diplomats, in which the establishment of the ‘Union of Great East Asia’ would be prepared. For this meeting, a formal address written by a leading scientist or philosopher was required.\(^{36}\) Nishida was offended by the request of Yatsugi Kazuo (1889–1983), the head of the Seminar for State Policy Orientation, and refused.\(^{37}\) In the same year a lecture was requested by the army leaders upon mediation by the ministry official Kanai (1885–1967).\(^ {38}\)

Nishida gave a lecture on the ideal of ‘State Reason’ at a seminar attended by dozens of leading politicians and ministry officials. The audience afterwards complained that Nishida’s lecture had been too difficult to understand. Nishida was asked to produce a more easily comprehensible version in writing, but he refused. Instead, the sociologist Tanabe Suketoshi (1894–1963) wrote a simplified text in the name of Nishida.\(^{39}\) This simplified presentation of the ideal of the ‘Union of Great East Asia’ was memorized by Prime Minister Tōjō Hideki (1884–1948) for a solemn lecture on the orientation of state policy. Nagai R. had given another speech in parliament, expressing the same sentiments. The gist of this was published in the newspapers. Nishida was desolate and uttered his disappointment in letter no. 1783 and 1784, addressed to his friends Hori and Watsuji (philosopher, 1889–1960), saying that the ideal of his philosophy was misunderstood by the politicians.\(^{40}\)

Nishida had attempted to put into practice his attitude, documented by letter no. 963, of: ‘a philosophical education of state politicians instead of violent altercation’. However, his efforts did not bear fruit. After the war, from the 1960s to the mid-1970s, the assumption was still widespread that Nishida, with his ‘Principle of the New World Order’, had been directly involved in the militarist and nationalist regime.\(^ {41}\) Iwanami, one of the renowned publishers in the Japanese literary world, included the article ‘The Principle of the New World Order’ in the complete works of Nishida as an appendix. The question of Nishida’s shared responsibility for the war, suggesting his connection with the wartime ideology, was discussed by the Japanese media until the 1950s and 1960s, even though the true facts had been revealed by the persons involved in the re-writing of Nishida’s original text.\(^ {42}\) The most recent publication concerning these issues is Ohashi’s detailed research into institutional historiography.\(^ {43}\) Kosaka gives a historically objective and adequate presentation and interpretation of the problem of ‘Philosophers and War’.\(^ {44}\)

7.3. Comments on the essays ‘The Problem of State Reason’ (1941), ‘The Principle of New World Order’ (1943) and ‘The Essence of the State’ (1944)

In one of his letters, Nishida said that the first essay was requested by the Ministry of the Army and that the government officials would be disappointed by its contents, which were purely metaphysical and philosophical. The third essay, requested by the delegate Morita in 1944, is a shorter version with similar contents. The text is summarized by Kosaka\(^ {45}\).
The world has a particular mission to fulfill in each different era. Its face changes while it moves in search of the new task. The eighteenth century was characterized by the fight for freedom of the citizen and by individualism. The nineteenth century saw the growth of self-assertive nations and of imperialism. The twentieth century has to find another vision: the awareness of nations to live together in a world common to all. For this, it is important for each nation to define its own position and particular task within a global scope. This is the challenge of the century. The world as a whole is no longer an abstract category, but reality. Forming part of this world, each nation is obliged to overcome its own limitations in order to contribute to a holistic world vision. In order to create this world, each people must transgress national barriers to form a regional unit of a global union. This unit must be designed according to the indigenous tradition and culture and must be established in different regions of the globe. Only then will it be possible to speak of a holistic global unity-multiplicity in state policy. It is important that each people becomes aware of the history of its development and that the members of a particular state unit focus on their duties. To live for this calling is the aim of the world citizen, the highest ideal in the development of world history. The principle of the new world order corresponds to this ideal. On this premise, the goal of the present World War must be to realize this ideal. The ideal of the universal unity of the eight continents* of the world must conform to this ideal. The imperial path must also be directed towards this aim. The principle of the Union of Great East Asia must be evolved out of this claim. The peoples in the Eastern regions of Asia must become aware of their task in world history, each one of them overcoming its limitations to become integrated into the unity-multiplicity, which will be moulded into the shape of the envisaged Union. The Union will serve to fulfill the tasks of the world citizens in the Eastern regions of Asia.

(\* Italic\s are used to denote the terminology typical of the regime during World War II.)

It should be noted that a terminology such as: ‘the imperial dynasty shows an absolute present which contains past, present and future in one’ (in ‘The Problem of State Reason’), ‘the spirit of the empire and the world universalism of the eight continents based thereon’ (in ‘The Essence of the State’) etc. were in current use in the parlance of those days. A phraseology of this kind was the consequence of censorship growing more and more rigid and reflects the ideas of totalitarianism.\textsuperscript{46} If such phrases were not employed, author and editor would be rebuked or punished. The liberal way of expression of our times was unknown (or foreign to the system) during the war period.

7.4. Criticism of Nishida’s ‘Logic of Field’ in Connection with World War II
A reversal of time is a physical impossibility. There remains the fact that Nishida, between 1943 and 1944 upon the request of politicians, wrote or drafted the abovementioned papers, and critics continue to point to the problem of the ‘ideological responsibility of the philosophers’, which was problematic in itself. The article by Maraldo, ‘The Absolute Present; Chasm or Chiasm of History in Nishida’s Philosophy?’\textsuperscript{47} shows a mixed interpretation regarding the philosophy of Nishida during the last years of his life.

This is similar to Heisig’s article, in that one section throws different subjects together. Maraldo also treats multi-faceted topics without differentiation. As I pointed out at the beginning of this paper, these are:

(1) The phenomena of militarism and totalitarianism pervading the state policy during the years 1937–1945 in Japan.
(2) The suppression of freedom in teaching in all areas of education and culture during the same period.
(3) Philosophers, scientists and artists who, expressing themselves in various media, took part in this totalitarian suppression.
From a socio-cultural angle one can group together these three subjects under one heading: ‘Socio-cultural phenomena in Japanese Society 1937-1945’. Maraldo, in addition, discusses another comprehensive topic, ‘Nishida’s Philosophy from the 1930s to 1945’, overlapping with the abovementioned socio-cultural phenomena. Fragmentary quotations are taken from the Complete Works of Nishida (vols. I – XIX, Tokyo 1965-66 published by Iwanami): from Vol. VI, page 150 the self-recognition of absolute mu (絶対無の自覚的限定), and from page 193 of the same volume, the absolute present in infinity (永遠の今の自己限定). From Vol. IX is cited the absolutely contradictory self-identity (絶対矛盾的自己同一), and from Vol. XI, the logic of field and the religious view of the world (場所的論理と宗教的世界観) (page 450). The quotation of Vol. XII, page 429 is from the article, ‘The Principle of the New World Order’, which I mentioned above. It is important to note that the terms cited by Maraldo define important basic concepts of Nishida’s philosophy which transcend the empirical horizon. The system of this philosophy, moreover, was constructed in complete independence from the actual policy pursued by the institutions of the state regime. The fragmentary phrase ‘Japanese spirit’48 (nihon seishin 日本精神) cited by Maraldo is found only four times in Vol. XI, quantitatively, this phrase is less than 0.3 % of the total contents of Vol. XI. And it is remarkable that Nishida criticized the crude nationalist rhetoric on ‘Japanese spirit’ every time, while this fragmentary phrase was simple parlance in the World War II period reflecting the attitude of society. For the essay ‘The Essence of the State’ (1944) the background situation is the same; the use of this term and the explanation given are common usage of the period, bowing to censorship of opinion. As I have already pointed out, Nishida was always concerned about fanatical nationalism and ideological ‘Japanism’ – ideologies which were crudely constructed by militarists (Prime Minister Tōjō and others), state politicians and the scientists close to them. Nishida’s basic attitude has already been referred to.

An interpretation such as that undertaken by Maraldo is questionable, in that the complete works of Nishida and of other authors which appeared between 1932 and 1945 are grouped together in Maraldo’s article, in a fragmentary manner, without prior investigation, under headings such as ‘Nationalism and War’ and ‘Taking Part in Militarism and Fascism without Protest’. Another consequence is that basic concepts such as ‘field’ (basho 場所), ‘absolute present’ (zettai genzai 絶対現在), ‘absolutely contradictory self-identity’ (zettai-mujun bō dōitsu 絶対矛盾的自己同一), out of which Nishida had evolved the system of his philosophical logic, are linked ad hoc to political and sociological phenomena of the period 1932–1945, without an in-depth exploration of these concepts. This sort of analysis occurs only because the creative period of the philosopher Nishida coincides with the political period referred to. It is regrettable that this kind of interpretation does not take into consideration the characteristics of Nishida’s philosophy, which implied wide aspects of hermeneutics, logic, metaphysics, ontology, arts and religions in his system of thought.

Nishida considered that the reason for the state consists in establishing a common ground for co-existential community of different persons, societies and nations. Drawing up this ideal he reflected that this concept should be handled in relation to a real vision of the empirical world, the philosophical idea must be connected with the reality of immanent daily life. The actual immanent world of Nishida was the militarist and nationalist regime. Some of the expressions found in the essays of 1943–4 (cf. sections 7.2. and 7.3. above) make an odd impression, as they do not agree with the original style of Nishida. In consideration of the serious situation of censorship we can suggest the difficult circumstances under which these essays came to be published. It is easy to pick out and criticize the fragmentary sentences connected with the parlance of the war period. However, this manner of argumentation is subject to one basic criticism. As I mentioned earlier, the argument comes from a one-sided viewpoint of the critic’s intra-system thinking. Aiming only at one point of the subject in a limited perspective, the critic denies the full system of philosophy of the author in question. In simultaneous explanation of philosophical theory and the behaviour of the philosopher as a person, every argument must be accompanied by accurate research, exploring
7.5. Life and Death in War Time

Nishida’s understanding of the ego or self has given rise to a mistake frequently made, which has also influenced further interpretation of Japanese history in this period. As mentioned previously, the concept of the essence of the state was elaborated by Nishida in a direction diametrically opposed to the expansion of the interests of state policy. Nishida aimed at a dissociation from the political interest, defining his own position of the holistic unity-multiplicity of states. Regarding this complex phenomenon in our above mentioned discourse, we could recognize a vivid reality of the past decade: In reflection of human lives a crude description of the phenomena focused from any subjectivity of an interpreter shows only a reverse of real criticism. The position peculiar to one’s own self or to one’s own state must be reflected upon not from the ego-like viewpoint but from the holistic position engulfing the whole world. The subject in this place of co-existence is an ego-less self, which in a co-existential network of life can flexibly and dynamically change for the better. Unfortunately, this metaphysical and ontological basis of the system of the ‘Logic of Field’ was not properly understood by those in political power. Philosophers are prone to encounter misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Nishida died before the end of the war and left several messages for an unknown future ‘after the war period’. The history of Nishida as a person is at an end. What remains is his works:

Life does not issue from pure matter. The restriction of life to matter means the death of the living being. The life of an individual is not infinite. The dead are eternal and can never rise again. From where does life spring? And where does death go? Here is the existence of a self defining its own limitations, in the absolute presence of here and now. Our self is such a one; it lives and passes away: Reflecting ourselves from moment to moment, It (such a self-reflecting self) is un-born (i.e. unchangeable); the living life for It is a mortal life and the life is at the same time nirvāna (immortal life, which has freed itself from suffering and confusion of any type). Egen (a Zen Buddhist monk of the fourteenth century) said: ‘With me, Egen, there is neither life nor death – living and dying are in me at the same time, as an inseparable unity’.50

Endnote

All translations from Japanese in this essay are mine. The names of Japanese persons are given in the original order: family name, given name. In the references below, titles in the original language are added in brackets.

1 A number of protocols written by participants of these tutorials have recently been discovered and published with a commentary by Ōhashi Ryōsuke (Ed.), Philosopher of the Kyoto School and the Marines (Kyoto gakuha to nihon kaigun), Tokyo 2001, PHP.
2 Individual essays by Nishitani (‘Aspects of World and State’, 1941), Koyama (‘Philosophy of World History’, 1942) and others will not be discussed in this paper due to their extensive scope.
5 See Endnote 2.

Hashi, Philosophy of Nishida in the Period of World War II
during the World War II period, seen from the 1997 viewpoint, but an in-depth evaluation of the entire development of Japan’s political, social and cultural history since the beginning of modern times is missing from these reflections.

13 Between 1811 and 1856, at a time when the great world powers were expanding, relations between Japan and Great Britain, France, the USA and Russia were often affected by conflicts over problems of colonialism. Crossing the border into Japan became another bone of serious contention between Japanese officials and foreign citizens. Cf. Kodama, Japanese History, Special Volume 5, pp. 274-292.
14 There are writers, not very well versed in the knowledge of Japanese literature, who interpret the teachings of kokugaku of Mabuchi, Norinaga and others as forerunners of Neo-Shintoism or as precursors of a politica substantiated nationalism. This should be questioned critically, differentiating between Hirata’s ideology of kokka shintō (Neo-Shintoism) with its political orientation and the aims of the original kokugaku as a humanistic literary movement. On the difference of Norinaga’s kokugaku and kokka Shintō by Hirata Atsutane and the historical development of both ways of thinking, see Muraoka Noritsugu, Norinaga and Atsutane (norinaga to atsutane), Tokyo 1957, 1981: sō bun-sha.


19 Ōhashi 2001, I.3.2., pp. 94-95.
20 Tanabe, in his mid-fifties, was more pronounced in stating his opinion. He was also capable of sophisticated oratory, agreeing with the government officials and voicing his indirect criticism at the same time. Cf. Ōhashi 2001, pp. 111-113.
22 Ōhashi 2001, pp. 222- 244.
25 Tanabe, Tutorial of 19 September 1943, in Ōhashi 2001, p. 29. See the chap. 2 of this article, Endnote 1.
26 Heisig, in: Rude Awakenings, 1995, pp. 279 – 285. Also on p. 284 the misleading interpretation of Nishida’s works (Complete Works vol. VII, VIII and IX ) is problematic: Heisig comments that Nishida achieved the goal of a harmonius union of individuals, specific (shu in the meaning of eidos), society and state without clear
criticism of or resistance against Nationalism. In my opinion the most critical point of this subject is shown just in this kind of the pre-position that Heisig interprets various parts of the Complete Works of Nishida in one-sided way: especially as far as concepts such as ‘state’, ‘society’, ‘nation’ etc. are concerned. The curious mistranslation is represented on p. 284, footnote 72, in the quotation of the Complete Works of Nishida vol. VIII, p. 288 and p. 451. In the original of Nishida there is a passage on p. 288: ‘A specific becomes a nation and Gemeinschaft. Existing things in front of us are national and social as an expression of an objective world. Furthermore it represents the reason and the objective spirit.’ (The underlined term was written by Nishida in German: ‘Gemeinschaft’). Another passage of Nishida on p. 451: ‘The reality is existing as a self transcendence. The life is constructive as a contradictory identity. It has always a definitive form and at the same time it has a potentiality to break open its rigid unity.’ (p. 451.) These parts are interpreted by Heisig on p. 284 as below: ‘Nishida was arguing that the mutual determination of the individual and the world was manifest biologically in a specific race and that this in turn, through the contractual relationship among individuals and between the individual and the race, forms the Gesellschaft into a civil society.’: If this part is related to the further explanation with the footnote 73 (Heisig, p. 284), the quoted parts of Nishida’s Complete Works vol. 9 (IX, pp. 146, 144 and 113) cannot be interpreted by that limited aspect as above: In my opinion it is necessary to note that the term of shu (comes only few times in the quoted work) by Nishida is used as an eidos in sense of Aristotelian Logic in reality, not in that meaning of a ‘race’. Nishida understood the unit of eidos as an individual and also as an integrative unit of various selves in a society which is capable to construct a state since the antiquity of Greek.

Sueki Takehiro, Rationalistic Philosophy in East Asian Civilizations (Tōyō no gōri shisō), Tokyo 1965: kōdansha.

Heisig 1995. In my opinion Tanabe’s logic must be reflected upon most carefully. In a pure ontological and epistemological view, his logic presents a dialectical spirit (Geist) which is to be realized in life. At the same time this logic is bound to show a relationship between pure epistemology and idealistically-oriented mankind in real life. The ‘real lives of mankind’ were overlapping with the social phenomena in the period of World War II and the behaviour of Tanabe as a person.


Ōhashi 2001, pp. 45-47.


Encyclopaedia for Education, Vol. V, p. 442. (See endnote 3.)


Kosaka 2002, Chapters 19 and 20.


